

Mark Longap, *Associated Press*

The National Guard spends about \$20 million to sponsor Dale Earnhardt Jr., NASCAR's most popular driver. The U.S. Army pays \$7.4 million to sponsor Ryan Newman. The U.S. Air Force doles out \$1.6 million to sponsor AJ Allmendinger.

Some lawmakers believe those deals are excessive and unnecessary.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., recently proposed an amendment that would have banned the Pentagon from using taxpayer dollars to sponsor NASCAR race teams. The House voted down the proposal last week by a 281-148 vote, but McCollum insisted the fight was far from over.

She planned to introduce broader legislation that would "prohibit taxpayer funds from being used for sponsorship of race cars, dragsters, Indy cars, and motorcycle racing." If passed, it would affect just about every level of motorsports.

"This was a vote about priorities and making smart choices," said Bill Harper, McCollum's chief of staff. "With trillion dollar federal deficits, this vote to protect taxpayer-funded race cars shows that even a Tea Party Republican-led Congress is not serious about cutting wasteful spending.

"The American people need to know that a majority in Congress is willing to cut homeless veterans, community health centers, and family planning services, but spend millions of tax dollars for race cars."

McCollum's strong beliefs raised eyebrows at Daytona International Speedway, where NASCAR team owners, drivers and military officers kept a close eye on the Capitol Hill debate.

Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley, in charge of the U.S. Army Accessions Command, was at Daytona to promote a new Army sponsorship of NASCAR's Drive for Diversity program, which aims to develop minority and female drivers and crew members. That sponsorship announcement was postponed because of the House vote.

Instead, Freakley found himself defending the Army's sponsorship of Newman's No. 39 Chevrolet.

Along with Newman's sponsorship, the Army spends another \$8 million for NASCAR programs that help recruiting efforts. The Army also spends \$3.9 million to sponsor Tony Schumacher's NHRA dragster.

The Air Force's spending on its NASCAR program represents less than 2 percent of its marketing budget, and the National Guard's outlay last year, \$32.7 million, represented 14 percent of its marketing budget.

Freakley said the Army's NASCAR sponsorship has dropped more than a third since 2009.

"We have (reduced) the races that we're in, we've (reduced) our sponsorship because it's the American people's money. We recognize that, but, regardless, I have to invest in awareness," Freakley said. "So, in some venue or another, I have to make some form of investment to make the American people aware of their Army and this is what we think is a good investment based on ... return on investment."

Freakley insisted it's money well spent.

He said motorsports marketing generated more than 150,000 leads in 2010, with a third of them coming from NASCAR.

"We know that this is having an impact on our recruiting and helping our recruiters with their job," Freakley said. "The alternative to this is having a recruiter walk up and down a mall and talk to about 150 people just to get one person to engage with them."

Freakley couldn't say how many recruits actually joined the Army because of the program, but said he hears stories all the time about teenagers who gain interest because of things that

happen on or around the track.

Brig. Gen. Balan Ayyar, commander of the Air Force's recruiting, said NASCAR is a perfect fit for the military.

"We have anecdotal data that suggests that the broad scope of our marketing strategy is working," he said.

However, there are plenty of skeptics.

Some point to the government's history of frivolous spending. Others believe motorsports marketing overlaps with television advertising campaigns and question whether racing events, which tend to attract older audiences, should be considered a fertile recruiting ground for the military.

McCollum and her supporters point out that the Marine Corps, the Navy and the Coast Guard eliminated their NASCAR sponsorships in recent years, and suggested everyone else should follow.

NASCAR, meanwhile, viewed the debate as a chance to prove the value the sport offers military recruiting efforts.

"Last week, military sponsors and NASCAR received a strong show of support in Congress," NASCAR spokesman Ramsey Poston said. "The vote helped raise awareness of military sponsors in NASCAR and what a remarkable recruiting tool it has been for the military.

"There's a direct link in keeping our military strong and our country safe."

The House vote was welcome news around the NASCAR garage - even though it might not be the last one.

"Obviously, this is a program that works for them or they wouldn't be part of this sport," said two-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart, who co-owns the Stewart-Haas Racing team that fields Newman's car. "It's been a very successful tool for the U.S. Army. Luckily, we get to continue that program with them. That was good news for us."